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# **‘Anthropomorphic Drones’ and Colonized Bodies: William Gibson’s *The Peripheral***

**(2014)**

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## **Introduction**

William Gibson tends to write in trilogies, as his first nine novels show. These series – the Sprawl, the Bridge, and the Blue Ant trilogies – are set in three different time periods and are populated by characters who reappear from one book to the next. Given this pattern in Gibson’s writing habits, 2014’s *The Peripheral* can be considered a new work, set in a separate universe from any of Gibson’s previous novels.<sup>1</sup> However, in terms of its philosophical position, *The Peripheral* is the continuation of a career-long trajectory. Gibson’s work is consistently concerned with the relationship of the individual to their society and the interface between the two, as mediated through the senses. The Sprawl trilogy and the Bridge trilogy privileged vision as the most important of the senses, particularly in cyberspace where the body is left behind and engagement with virtual reality happens mainly through the eyes gazing on a computer screen. 2003’s *Pattern Recognition*, the first novel in the Blue Ant trilogy which went on to include *Spook Country* (2007) and *Count Zero* (2010), began to resituate the body and specifically the haptic as key to engaging with the world while *The Peripheral* takes this philosophical journey further, privileging the haptic as a key site of phenomenological engagement. The term “haptic” refers to the sense of touch, in the same way that “optic” refers to the sense of vision. As a kind of phenomenology, a gateway to understanding the world around us, it is perhaps best understood through the lens of affect theory which attempts to think about intuitions and unconscious autonomic responses to the environment in a move based on the theories of Gilles Deleuze. “Affect Studies”, as Robert Seyfert describes, “captures the situational nature of affect in conceptualizing affects, as *emerging* at the moment when bodies meet, *affecting* the bodies involved in the encounter, and *marking the transformation/s* of the bodies” (2012: 29, emphasis in original). This means that “affects” can include haptics, the focus of my attention here, but also emotions.<sup>2</sup> The increasing importance of the haptic and of affect more generally are crucial to understanding

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<sup>1</sup>While Gibson usually writes in trilogies, *The Peripheral* may not be the first in a new series. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 2015 Gibson wrote on Twitter, “reviewing the day’s work. I seem to be writing a book set this October. Near future then”. This fits more closely with the time period of the Blue Ant trilogy rather than that of *The Peripheral*. For Gibson’s Twitter account, see @greatdismal.

<sup>2</sup> Although, as Seyfert argues, the two should not be conflated, “since ‘emotion’ usually refers to the particular human configurations, I suggest using ‘affect’ as a general term that defines relations among all kinds of bodies, or which emotion is but one particular form” (Seyfert, 2012: 31)

the development of the politics in Gibson's novels over his career. The detachment and individualism of vision is increasingly tempered by the haptic and affective which demand characters recognise their interdependence as embodied beings in a shared world. This turn to the haptic therefore offers a new ecocritical politics that changes the ways in which the future is depicted. Once again Gibson is contributing to the direction of science fiction as a genre and as a literary technique by asking what we need from the future, and how can science fiction serve this need?

*The Peripheral* is structured by a series of alternating chapters capturing two different points of view: that of Flynne, a young woman in late-capitalist, near-future America, and that of Wilf Netherton, a freelance public relations man in post-Jackpot London who works for the reality star and performance artist, Daedra. The event known as the "Jackpot" is an apocalyptic watershed moment that happens between Flynne's and Wilf's different presents, killing off the majority of human beings on the planet, leaving Wilf's London to a privileged elite and the robots (or, "peripherals") who serve them. The two are brought together when Wilf's oligarch friend, Lev, finds a way to communicate with the past through a mysterious computer server. Flynne's present is not Wilf's past as communication changes the timeline, causing the two to diverge, a process that gives such timelines the nickname of 'stubs'. Flynne's world is characterised by its weak economy, based primarily on 3D printing and with a "funny" (black market) economy as vital as straight business. Wilf's world is underpopulated, with peripherals filling in for missing people, and an economy dominated by inherited wealth and public relations. Flynne becomes involved with Wilf, Lev, and his assistant Ash after she witnesses a crime: when her brother, Burton, asks her to fill in for him in his job, flying drones in what he thinks is an advanced computer game, Flynne witnesses the murder of Daedra's sister Aelita, a real murder that takes place not in a computer game but in Wilf's futuristic London. She agrees to pilot the titular "peripheral", an advanced, realistic robot in order to attend a party and identify the murderer. The use of the peripheral raises Flynne's awareness of her mind-body connection, as does her relationship with her brother who was damaged during his time as a soldier. Burton was tattooed with patterns known as "haptics" which allow his body to be controlled remotely, turning his body into a kind of drone. His fellow veteran, Conner, has also been damaged by the war and is a quadruple amputee. As the novel goes on, communication between Flynne's world and Wilf's forces both of them to reassess their worlds, their pasts, and their futures.

## **Sight and Cyberpunk**

Sight has always been the most privileged of senses in cyberpunk literature since it was first anthologised by Bruce Sterling in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986). Sterling recognises the importance of sight in cyberpunk, choosing the symbol of the mirrorshades as emblematic of the Movement. Sterling writes:

Mirrored sunglasses have been a Movement totem since the early days of '82. The reasons for this are not hard to grasp. By hiding the eyes, mirrorshades prevent the forces of normalcy from realising that one is crazed and possibly dangerous...Mirrorshades – preferable in chrome or matte black, the Movement's totem colours – appear in story after story, as a kind of literary badge. (ix)

Sterling locates the ubiquity of the mirrorshades in the wish to maintain the activity of vision while shielding oneself from the vulnerability of being seen, protecting the individual and setting them apart from the rest of society. The most famous example is Molly Millions' surgically-implanted mirrorshades in Gibson's debut novel *Neuromancer* (1984); because of her implants Molly's tear ducts are re-routed so that when she cries, she spits. This translation of vulnerability into social non-conformity situates seeing as a powerful act, and one which is highly important to cyberpunk as a genre.

In the Sprawl trilogy this elevation of sight above the other senses often reinscribes mind-body dualism as the body is, in many ways, considered less important than the mind and the sense of sight provides the most direct link between the outside world (whether physical or virtual) and consciousness. *Neuromancer's* Case, the cyberpunk cowboy, finds the matrix a purer and more satisfying arena for action than the real world around him and experiences his withdrawal from cyberspace as falling back into the meat of his body. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles points out that this reduction of the personality to a point of view (pov) results in the elision of the fleshly body and of mediation itself:

instead of an embodied consciousness looking through the window at a scene, consciousness moves *through* the screen to become the pov, leaving behind the body as an unoccupied shell. In cyberspace, point of view does not emanate from the character; rather the pov literally *is* the character. (38)

This reduction of the character to the pov is the ultimate privileging of sight over the other senses and this focus on vision as the quintessentially human sense continues through Gibson's next series, the Bridge trilogy, in which "seeing" patterns in chaos allows some characters to predict the future and marks the dividing line between human and artificial intelligence (AI). The trilogy's most important AI, a Japanese pop idol or *idoru* known as Rei Toei, sees pattern recognition as impossible and innate to humans, as she explains to another character who tries to teach her:

Perhaps, if shown, she, this posthuman emergent entity, would simply start to see this way as well. And he had been disappointed when she had finally told him that what he saw was not there for her; that his ability to apprehend the nodal points, those emergent systems of history, was not there, nor did she expect to find it with growth. "This is human, I think," she'd said when pressed. "This is the result of what you are, biochemically, being stressed in a particular way. This is wonderful. This is closed to me". (Gibson 1999: 165)

In the Bridge trilogy characters are not often reduced to a pov as less of the action takes place in cyberspace than is the case in the Sprawl trilogy. However, as one can see in the above quote, vision is still used as a particularly human sense, one that divides the human from artificial intelligence and therefore gives it an important role in the hierarchy of being.

### ***Pattern Recognition's Vision and Science Fiction***

This privileging of the visual continues to an extent in the Blue Ant trilogy (2003-10), as can be seen in the title of 2003's *Pattern Recognition* whose plot revolves around a mysterious silent film, a medium that appeals only to the visual. However, while the title continues to highlight the importance of vision in Gibson's work, in this novel the change of emphasis from the visual towards the haptic begins to make itself known: there is a move towards privileging the autonomic systems of the characters and heightening the importance of affective being, particularly of the haptic. Gibson's protagonist, Cayce Pollard, is 'allergic' to certain types of advertising and experiences nausea and vomiting when confronted with Tommy Hilfiger merchandise, or the Michelin Man. This reaction to her environment is unconscious and happens in the body, bypassing Cayce's intellectual abilities, although her bodily responses are triggered by the primarily visual stimulus of advertising in her environment. The novel follows Cayce as she comes to terms with her father's disappearance

during the attacks on New York that took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. The combination of Cayce's trauma and her bodily responses makes *Pattern Recognition* a novel that portrays the importance of affective responses. It also shows how pattern recognition, or optical information more generally, can be misleading, as human beings are programmed to look for patterns, a propensity that often leaves them confused by coincidence and conspiracy theories. Lauren Berlant has pinpointed the shift from the visual to the affective in her book on affect theory, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), in which she reads *Pattern Recognition* as an example of the politics of affect. She describes affective atmospheres as "shared, not solitary", thereby connecting affect to the political milieu in which they are generated: "bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves" (15). Berlant particularly considers *Pattern Recognition* as an example of this politics of affect as Cayce reacts to her late-capitalist milieu with intuition and the direct, bodily response of nausea and vomiting.

The Blue Ant trilogy (2003-10) is set almost contemporaneously with its dates of publication but despite this the novels maintain an estranging tone and analogies or references to science fiction are often used, leading Veronica Hollinger to classify Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* as "science fiction realism", "a self-reflexive account, reconstructed as mimetic realism, of a story he has written several times already as science fiction" (2006: 460-1) in an observation that echoes Bruce Sterling's earlier claim, that cyberpunk writers:

are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world. For them, the techniques of "hard SF" – extrapolation, technological literacy – are not just literary tools but an aid to daily life. They are a means of understanding, and highly valued. (ix)

From Hollinger's analysis, and Sterling's opinion on cyberpunk even in 1986, *Pattern Recognition* and the Blue Ant trilogy of which it is a part become a natural development, an expression of the interest in the present that cyberpunk always had, combined with the acknowledgement that the future cannot be predicted from a future that is constantly in flux. Gibson emphasises this point by infiltrating the Blue Ant trilogy's contemporary setting with science-fictional motifs and. For example, in *Zero History* (2010) the main character, Hollis, describes the shower in her hotel room as "a Victorian monster, its original taps were hulking knots of plated brass. Horizontal four-inch nickel-plate pipes caged you on three sides...It reminded her of H. G. Wells's time machine" (2010: 16), she sees a "Martian-green" statue

(8) and she reads a light fitting as “the shadow of a mothership” (77). Gary Westfahl points out these references and many, many more, leading him to speculate that, “our future now overlaps with the present, and strange possibilities once envisioned in futuristic science fiction now happen all around us, even if we are not yet aware of them, so we already live in a science fiction world” (134). Gibson’s use of realism with a contemporary setting to express science-fictional impulses while at the same time elevating the haptic over the optic has the combined effect of bringing the needs of the future into focus. Science fiction is, generally speaking, about the understanding the contemporary period of the readers and writers. Gibson’s science fiction realism can be considered a metafiction, not only commenting on its contemporary period, but establishing what that contemporary period needs from a future. Mere extrapolation is not enough to satisfy a society that is being regularly told that the end is nigh, either at the hands of terrorists or rising sea levels. Gibson’s work suggests that something different is required from the future, and therefore from science fiction. *The Peripheral* is his attempt to begin addressing this need, through portraying the interdependence of the individual with their society, and with their environment.

### ***The Peripheral* and the Politics of Haptic Cyberpunk**

There are some sly links between *The Peripheral* and Gibson’s previous cyberpunk novels, implicit notes to the reader that the novel marks a return to science fiction proper after the Blue Ant trilogy’s contemporary setting. *The Peripheral* openly signals its move to science fiction as a return to the roots of cyberpunk and to *Neuromancer* in particular. Flynn’s gamer tag is “Easy ICE”, a reference to the Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics (ICE) of *Neuromancer*, the term Gibson uses for what we might now refer to incongruously as a “firewall”. Those who can easily break the ICE are the cyberpunk cowboys, like Gibson’s main protagonist, Case. Flynn’s gamer tag therefore suggests that she shares an outlaw status and skill as a hacker with Case, developing her characterisation while allowing Gibson to signal the continuum between *Neuromancer* and *The Peripheral*. Another echo of *Neuromancer* is in the body modifications of Wilf’s client, the celebrity performance artist Daedra. Daedra has had a series of body modifications, one of which is, “a thumbnail. As long, when it fully emerged, as her forearm” (25), echoing the bladed nails of Molly Millions in *Neuromancer*. When Case first meets her, Molly threatens him as “with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails” (37). The traces of Gibson’s earlier work signal his return to a more overtly

cyberpunk concern with body modification, a feature that was absent in the Blue Ant trilogy where the only interventions into the “natural” body were framed as medical, in response to disability or injury.<sup>3</sup>

While various themes from *Neuromancer* such as body modification reappear in *The Peripheral*, they are used in a different way; to elevate affective channels, such as the sense of touch, in order to draw attention to the interdependence of individuals, communities, and environments. The novel forges connections between vision and affective sensation, particularly in the character of Burton, Flynn’s older brother. Burton understands the importance of vision, as is clear when he teaches his sister how to win a computer game against a competitive opponent, an ex-SS officer. Burton emphasises the importance of seeing in becoming the predator, rather than the prey:

Burton came over, sat on the couch beside her, watching her play, and told her how he saw it. How the SS officer, convinced he was hunting her, wasn’t seeing it right. Because really, now, Burton said, she was hunting him. Or would be, as soon as she realized she was, while his failure to see it was a done deal, fully underway, growing, a wrong path... And sometimes she felt him jerk, haptic misfire, while he was helping her find her own way of seeing it. Not to learn it, he said, because it couldn’t be taught, but to spiral in with it, each turn tighter, further into the forest, each turn closer to seeing it exactly right. (48)

As in Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* or the Bridge trilogy that came before, sight is here characterised as an intuitive sense and an active one. By becoming aware of what is usually a subconscious intuition, Flynn can actively choose how she sees the action in front of her, thereby acquiring the advantage over her opponent. This active sight is reminiscent of Ender’s revelation in Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985), one of the earliest and most significant science fiction video game novels. Ender is being trained for war and plays a game in which he and his team must battle another team, overcome them and reach their gate. Ender realises that fighting in zero gravity gives him the advantage of choosing which direction to think of as “up” or “down” and tells his teammates to remember that “the enemy’s gate is down”. By shifting their perspective, he and his team take control of their battles and have repeated victories. Ender’s tragedy is that he takes part in the war through

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Nora’s body in *Pattern Recognition*, paralysed in a bomb blast, or Garreth in *Zero History*, injured in a BASE jump and healed with artificial bones made from rattan.



what we would call drone strikes. The training he undertakes on a computer screen turns out not to be a war game, but a remote piloting system through which he inadvertently commits genocide. The connection between remote killing and the illusion of sight as a sense that allows for control and for keeping that which is seen at a distance is echoed in *The Peripheral*. Even as Burton describes the importance of sight and its active role, his strategic advice is punctuated by the intervention of his body by his glitching haptics, the physical manifestation of the mental illness of PTSD. Vision might be important, but the body is never left behind, as Ender discovered too late.

The haptic rendering of the relationship between the player and the game is in marked contrast to the depiction of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*; while Case's matrix is a purely virtual environment, Flynnne is unwittingly controlling a drone in a futuristic London. Despite an experience that could be considered more "real", Flynnne's experience remains rooted in her physical presence at the computer. While she observes the "bugs" in the game, other drones that she has been tasked to disperse, she remains aware of bodily sensations such as the need for food and drink:

Took the jerky out of her mouth, put it on the table. The bugs were back, jockeying for position in front of the window, if that was what it was. Her free hand found the Red Bull, popped it. She sipped. (14)

As one can see from this passage, there is no leaving the "meat" behind, whether that be the meat of Flynnne's physical body or the meat of the jerky that she chews in her mouth:

Back around, the bugs were already bobbing, waiting. She flew through them, making them vanish. Tongued the cud of jerky away from her cheek and chewed. Scratched her nose. Smelled hand sanitizer. Went after bugs. (22)

Flynnne's perception is split between different senses, as evidenced by the short sentences which act as flitting sensations across Flynnne's sensorium. Sight, touch, taste and smell are all evoked so that Flynnne's optical experience of what she thinks of as a video game does not transcend her other senses. Even Flynnne's visual perception, the primary means of engaging with the video game, is experienced as mediated. There is nothing direct about her vision, no direct connection between the optic and the mind: "Camera down giving her the white rectangle of the van, shrinking in the street below. Camera up, the building towered away

forever, a cliff the size of the world” (9). The mediation of the “camera” prevents Flynnne from experiencing her visual input as direct, certainly no more so than any of her other senses. Vision is no longer elevated above the other senses in the way it once was in *Neuromancer*. The connections between *Neuromancer* and *The Peripheral*, such as Flynnne’s gamer tag, Easy ICE, serve to highlight the contrast between the two experiences of virtual (or, in Flynnne’s case, remote) reality. Flynnne’s rootedness in her own bodily experience paves the way for the novel’s wider consideration of the importance of touch and the body.

Technology in *The Peripheral* has also been modified, becoming increasingly haptic and moving away from the purely visual experience of the matrix in *Neuromancer*, as in the description of mobile phone technology in Wilf Netherton’s timeline. He uses his phone through touch, and with his mouth in a more intimate gesture than a on a touch screen: “Netherton swiped his tongue from right to left, across the roof of his mouth, blanking his phone...he double-tapped the roof of his mouth, causing the feeds, left and right, from their respective corners of the square, to show [the image]” (24). Essentially, the tasks that we would perform with a mobile phone have been implanted into Netherton’s body creating a haptic relationship between himself and his technology, one that we can read as an extrapolation of the increasingly tangible relationship we have with our present day technology through the ubiquity of touch screens. The connection between the body, the mind, and technology is also present in the ambiguous nature of the peripherals themselves. Their ontological status is uncertain as they are human “on a cellular level” (124) so they are not merely cameras used to view remote action, but there is no consciousness in these bodies when they are not occupied by a pilot so neither are they independent beings. Wilf recognises the less-than-human nature of the peripheral as he meets the peripheral his colleague Rainey is piloting: “He imagined her now, stretched on a couch in her elongated Toronto apartment, a bridge across an avenue, diagonally connecting two older towers. She’d be wearing a headband, to trick her nervous system into believing the rented peripheral’s movements were hers in a dream” (30). Wilf does not see the peripheral as an avatar or a substitute for Rainey, but as a tool mediating his interaction with her.

The mediation of the peripherals is regularly reinforced through the description of the experience of touch while piloting them, such as when Wilf watches Flynnne first become accustomed to the sensation of feeling via peripheral: ‘Lightly tapping a knuckle on a steel handle. Testing the peripheral’s sensoria, he guessed’ (195). As Flynnne tests out her peripheral’s haptics, Lev’s assistant Ash warns her that the experience may give her some trouble when she returns to her own perceptions:

Your peripheral's sensorium is less multiplex than your own. You may find your own sensorium seems richer, but not pleasantly so. More meaty, some say. You'll have gotten used to a slightly attenuated perceptual array, though you likely don't notice it now. (226)

When Flynnne enters the peripheral for the first time, her haptic connection to the peripheral is still not immersive but connected with other senses in a synesthetic experience. She sees, 'that colour like Burton's haptics scar, but she could taste it behind her teeth' (175). The combination of colour (sight) and taste make the affective experience of using the peripheral an intensely mediated one. Ash describes the peripheral to Flynnne as "an anthropomorphic drone...a telepresence avatar" (175). Rather than read the peripheral as an avatar of herself, she connects it with military drones, recognising its anthropomorphic nature for what it is, merely a superficial illusion. Flynnne judges the peripheral based on its use – surveillance and telecommunication – and the affect of piloting it, not on its visual appearance which she finds disconcerting. Netherton has chosen the peripheral to resemble Flynnne as much as possible, in order to minimise the confusion when Flynnne begins to pilot it, but Flynnne does not recognise it as a likeness, "just the haircut" (259). "That familiar pang, when she looked into the tall mirror: Who was that? She was starting to feel like the peripheral looked like somebody she'd known, but she knew it didn't" (441). There is no identification between the peripheral and its pilot, no more so than between a drone and its remote controller. The origins of the peripheral's technology in the military and the sensory mediation prevent any direct identification between peripheral and pilot.

The mediation of touch is also found in Daedra's performance art. Traditionally, touch has been considered the most immediate of senses because of the nature of the skin, the primary organ associated with haptic perception.<sup>4</sup> As part of her performance art, Daedra repeatedly tattoos her skin before having it flayed and displays her past skins as pieces of art. This separation of the skin (and the implication that the experiences are separated with it as part of the performance and in the ink of the tattoos) highlights the skin as the organ of touch, drawing attention to the mediation required for haptic perception. The illusion that touching the skin is some kind of direct contact with another person is shattered, just as social media shatters the illusion that knowing everything about a person's daily movements can equate to

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of the history of touch and its role in philosophy from Aristotle, see Mark Paterson's *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (2007).

“knowing” them. Daedra’s artistic process works as a series of removals, making the skin less authentic to her life experience with every stage: “Each of her pieces is a complete epidermis, toes to the base of the neck. Reflecting her life experience during the period of the work. She has that removed, preserved, and manufactures facsimiles, miniatures, which people subscribe to” (347-8). The production of Daedra’s skins shows the impossibility of recording affect itself, the wordlessness of an individual’s emotional and autonomic relationship to the world.

The mediation of haptic experience is brought to the fore once more through the use of this very term to describe the traces on Burton’s flesh of the remote control device used on him while he was a soldier. Burton’s haptics are tattoos used to control him during his time as a soldier, turning him into an “anthropomorphic drone” of a different kind:

They didn’t think Flynnne’s brother had PTSD, but that sometimes the haptics glitched him. They said it was like phantom limb, ghosts of the tattoos he’d worn in the war, put there to tell him when to run, when to be still, when to do the bad-ass dance, which direction and what range. (1)

The war machine has colonised Burton’s body, turning him into a drone, controlled remotely by someone else. Even his sense of touch, that sense considered so close to the unspoken world of affect, has been co-opted. The fact that his symptoms are not recognised as PTSD show that this link between his body and his mind has been damaged by his experience and he is not even able to (emotionally) feel the effects of the war, but can only feel them in his skin, when the haptics glitch him. This experience is reflected in Burton’s gamer tag, “Hapt-Rec”, short for “Haptic Recon 1”, the name of his army platoon, but it evokes the meaning “Haptic Wreck”, one whose haptics have been forever damaged by his use as a drone. Flynnne understands Burton’s army experience as one of remote control, of being used as a drone: “Burton won a lot of drone games, was really good at them, Haptic Recon 1 having been about them, so many ways. Even, she’d heard someone say, that Burton himself had been a sort of drone, or partially one, when he’d still had the tattoos” (89). Drones are used for both surveillance and attack, a dual concern that is reflected in Gibson’s continued concern with perception as an ontological category alongside his recent turn towards the haptic. The body is under attack from drones and as part of the warfare system and the systems of exploitation we find today; therefore the body (and its vulnerability) must come to the fore in any account of those systems, science fictional or otherwise. The background of the video game also links

classic Gibson with modern concerns, perception with the body count of the drone as Flynn repeatedly confuses the piloting of the unmanned vehicle with a video game. Gibson has been interested in the links between culturally important fields (technology in the *Sprawl* trilogy, fashion in the *Blue Ant* trilogy) and their use (or origin) in military contexts. In *The Peripheral* military uses are shown at the root of robotic technology, something that precludes human beings from experiencing robots as anything other than manmade automatons as their origins in warfare are marked into their design and, for the humans, into the experience of interacting with them.

This trauma (unfelt by Burton, except in his skin) may be at the heart of this move from the optical to the haptic. In *Pattern Recognition* where this move began to make itself known, the traumatic event was 9/11 and Cayce's loss of her father in the attack. In *The Peripheral* there is a very personal experience of trauma, that of Burton and Conner, both victims of a war that colonised their bodies and left them scarred and partial. However, there is also a collective sense of trauma in the novel's other strand. The post-Jackpot world is itself scarred and partial through the loss of its populations. The scars of the Jackpot can perhaps be read most clearly in Ash's tattoos. Extinct species are tattooed onto her body in moving images, reminders of the lost world, "Ash...her hand quite black with tattoos, a riot of wings and horns, every bird and beast of the Anthropocene extinction, overlapping line drawings of a simple yet touching precision" (50). As in Daedra's performance art, the skin and tattooing are considered the appropriate medium for this tribute to extinct species, a constant reminder of their loss. While there is a certain nostalgia in Ash's tattoos that Netherton judges as kitschy, there is the sense that the tattoos are also a real reminder of the problems humanity has caused. While Netherton watches her he sees, "the line drawing of a sole albatross, slowly and as if in distant flight, circling her white neck" (52). The imagery of the albatross, particularly around the neck, is reminiscent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in which the albatross is a good luck charm for the sailors, but which is shot by the titular mariner. Upon its death his fellow sailors blame him for a bad turn in the weather, "all averred, I had killed the bird/ That made the breeze to blow" (210). As a punishment they hang the albatross around his neck, to remind him of the curse he has brought on the crew, leading to their deaths. The mariner is left alone among the dead men, just as the population of Netherton's timeline are left in the empty space left by the majority of mankind who perished in the Jackpot. Ash's tattoos, like the ancient mariner's albatross, are a visual and tactile reminder that humanity has brought about its own end through its treatment of the planet.

Part of this curse is the saturation of the post-Jackpot world with drones and drone technology. In *Drone Warfare* (2013), Medea Benjamin points out that drones are rumoured to have acquired their name through their resemblance to bees. The post-Jackpot world is beeless, so the omnipresence of the bee-like drones, emblematic of the increased security of the 1% and the increased vulnerability and extra-judicial killing of the 99% is a constant reminder to those living in this world of the trade they have made: optimum security in exchange for a healthy planet. The trauma of the post-Jackpot world is present in the relationship between Flynne's and Wilf's timelines. They are bridged through the server, as though those in Wilf's present feel condemned to visit the past again and again even if they can never change their own present. Even this traumatic revisiting is only done in order to accrue capital, not to work out problems or to free the people in the stub, but to colonise their world and to feed off of it in an act that can never lead to closure but can only reinforce the power of the kleptocracies and the oligarchies that rule Wilf's time. As Ash points out, it is "imperialism...We're third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier'" (103). There is no sense of the future for Wilf and his associates, who merely move from one job to another, or live off of the wealth of their relatives, separated from other people and with no way to experience the passage of time, the possibility of a new and different future.

This understanding of the event, to some extent, explains the almost bizarre overly-domesticated scene which is Flynne's life at the end of the novel. Flynne is pregnant with the Deputy Sherriff's baby, Burton and Flynne's friend Shaylene have consummated a romance that had gone unrequited in the novel up to that point, as have Conner and a young woman named Clovis. Conner has had new limbs created through 3D printing, using the technology they have acquired through their communication with Netherton's timeline. Using their money and the business they bought from Lev's fortune, Flynne and her extended family are doing all they can to avoid the Jackpot, a possibility that seems likely in the novel's closing pages, even if Flynne worries "that they weren't really doing more than just building their own version of the klept" (481). The encounter with the future frees the timeline from the necessity of the Jackpot and allows the characters to orient themselves towards a future once again.

## **Conclusion**

Philosophically, the move from optics to haptics is a journey from the fetishization of the subject's ability to control their environment, to a subject who is interdependent with their

environment. This journey could be seen as one of activity to passivity, one of which Burton's suffering is emblematic as he teaches Flynn about the active nature of perception while suffering the glitching of his haptics, a passive victim. However, the novel does some work to challenge this active/ passive dichotomy. Their interdependence and their affective relationship with their environment, highlighted by the cautionary tale of the Jackpot, represents a call to action, to prevent the future that Netherton describes. In affect theory this dichotomy is similarly being challenged. In a discussion of haptic aesthetics in the work of Deleuze and Derrida, Claire Colebrook argues that a turn towards the haptic in philosophy represents a need for something that cannot be captured by philosophical or theoretical thinking, as thinking is by definition reflexive and requires a certain distance as opposed to the immediacy of the affective:

Questions or problems – what we might refer to as *theoretical* events – that would strive not simply to live in pure immediacy but enquire into the possibility of the sensible, empirical, haptic or material must by their very nature fail. Theory fails: the look or distance that would intelligently differentiate itself from mere presence and naivety must also, in the very structure of its questioning, be other than the life from which it emerges. (24)

This inability to portray touch, the necessity of mediation, means that *The Peripheral* cannot hope to portray the haptic in any direct way. However, it still attempts to do so, incorporating touch and the other senses into its text to an extent that we have not seen from Gibson before. The reason for making this impossible attempt is that the novel seeks to show how the human body itself is subject to the political and economic factors that control society. Rather than the active, almost libertarian, outlook of *Neuromancer's* cyberpunk cowboys, *The Peripheral* shows the subjection of the planet to anthropogenic disasters. The activity of humans can destroy the world or save it, but the affective interdependence with the environment acts as a warning signal that must be heeded, rather than a mere passive way of being in the world.

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